

man may fear that she will be so oppressively dependent upon him that a relationship with her may strike him as a terrifying prospect. To prove him wrong she may strive for self-sufficiency, only to have him say that she's too aggressive and unfeminine.

People may pity the disabled woman for her handicap, or admire her for her strength in overcoming it, but she is too unlike other females to be whistled at on the street. Somehow she is perceived as a nonsexual being. If men don't make passes at girls who wear glasses, what chance does a blind girl have, or one in a wheelchair, or a woman with spastic hands?

American culture still pictures the ideal woman: slender, blonde, blue-eyed, and physically perfect. Of course, there is plenty of leeway, and not every man is worried about these cultural stereotypes when choosing a mate. But as long as a woman remains a status symbol to the man who "possesses" her, the living proof of his prowess, the woman with a disability will be at a severe disadvantage. The man who is not completely secure will be afraid to show her off with pride because she is too different.

The worst period for most disabled men and women is probably adolescence, when conformity to the group's norms is all-important. Then, even being overweight or having a bad case of acne is enough to brand one as a pariah. Things may become easier later on, as emphasis on outward appearances gradually yields to concern with qualities as well. But it is hard to shake off the sense of being an outcast.

Even when she establishes a healthy relationship with a man, the disabled woman may sometimes find herself wondering, "Why does he want me unless there is something wrong with him? If someone else comes along, won't he leave me for her?"

But why, I ask myself, should it ever make a difference to society whether people with disabilities are ever accepted intact—as human beings with minds, feelings, and sexuality? Though we have become more vocal in recent years, we still constitute a very small minority.

Yet the Beautiful People—the slender, fair, and perfect ones—form a minority that may be even

smaller. Between these two groups are the average, ordinary citizens: Men who are too short, women who are too tall, people who are too fat or too thin, people with big noses, protruding ears, receding hairlines, and bad complexions. Millions of people go through life feeling self-conscious or downright inadequate, fearing that others will reject them for these physical flaws. Perhaps the struggle of disabled people is really everyone's battle against the binding rules of conformity, the struggle for the right to be an individual.

As I sat in that consciousness-raising group, I realized that disabled women have a long and arduous fight ahead. Somehow we must learn to perceive ourselves as attractive and desirable. Our struggle is not unlike the striving for self-acceptance of the millions of nonhandicapped who also fall short of the Beautiful People image.

Our liberation will be a victory for everyone.

[1987]

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### *Brideland*

NAOMI WOLF

Brideland exists primarily in the bridal magazines, which conjure up a fantastic, anachronistic world that really exists nowhere beyond itself. It is a nineteenth-century world, in which major late-twentieth-century events, like the sexual revolution and the rise of the financially self-supporting woman, seem to have transpired only glancingly, to be swept away by a dimity flounce like so much unsightly grit. It is a theme park of upward mobility; in *Brideland*, in the events surrounding The Event, everyone is temporarily upper middle class: everyone routinely throws catered events and hires musicians and sends engraved invitations and keeps carriages or vintage cars awaiting. At the ceremony itself, things become downright feudal: the bride is treated like a very queen with her court of "maids." She has, perhaps, a child to lift her train, a child to

bear her ring, and a sparkling tiara upon her hair. Cinderella is revealed in her true aristocratic radiance at last, and, in the magazines, she is perpetually arriving at the ball.

Brideland has very little to do with the relationship or even the marriage: it is, like any theme park, eternally transient: you enter, you are transformed completely, and then, presumably, you depart. It is a world of lush feminine fantasy, eerily devoid of men, who appear, if at all, as shadow figures retrieving luggage or kneeling before the bride in a state of speechless awe. Brideland has an awful lot to say about what women want that they are not getting, and it taught me a thing or two about myself.

My own initiation was abrupt. Shortly after we made our announcement, I picked up one of those magazines, mostly to find out what the rules were that I was bound to be breaking. As I turned page after page, I started to change. Long-buried yearnings surfaced, a reminder, which little else gives me, that until I was six, I inhabited a world unchanged by the 1970's women's movement. Somehow, I had picked up atavistic feelings about *The Bride* that I would never have recognized in my conscious, feminist, and more skeptical mind.

By page 16 my capacity for irony was totally paralyzed. I tried hard to activate it but, as in a dream, I was powerless; it wouldn't budge. By page 32 I was hypnotized; by the time I reached the end, the honeymoon section—for the magazines are structured chronologically, as if they want to be sure you know what comes first—I had acquired new needs; blind, overwhelming, undeniable needs. The fantasies I had put away in 1966 with Bridal Barbie resurfaced with a vengeance. I needed . . . garters! And engraved stationery—engraved, not printed! And fetching little lace mitts; and a bouquet that trailed sprays of stephanotis! And heavens, maybe a veil or mantilla of some kind—down my back, of course, not over my face—would not be as unthinkable as I had thought.

You must understand: this is coming from a woman who had viewed all traditional wedding appurtenances as if they represented death by cuteness. While I am the product of an egalitarian marriage, and fervently believe in the possible goodness

of life partnership, I have had such a strong resistance to all things matrimonial that when I pass Tiffany's I break out in a cold sweat. I could imagine eloping; or a civil ceremony; or even an alternative ceremony, so creatively subversive that it would be virtually unrecognizable for what it is. But not—never—a wedding.

Part of my aversion comes from my ambivalence, not about the man—about whom I have no doubts—but about the institution. How can I justify sealing such a private, precious relationship with a legal bond that lets a man rape his wife in 14 states? How can I endorse an institution that, in the not-too-distant past, essentially conveyed the woman over to her husband as property, denying her even the right to her own property? How can I support a system that allows me to flaunt my heterosexual relationship brazenly, but forbids deeply committed gay and lesbian friends of mine to declare their bonds in the same way? How can I ask my love to be sanctioned by a legal order that leaves divorcing women to struggle in a desperately unevenly matched battle in sexist courts for money and custody of children? And, less profoundly, but no less urgently, if I were to do it, what on earth would I wear?

Brideland lulls the reader into a haze of romantic acquisitiveness that leaves most such political considerations firmly outside the threshold. The magazines' articles about the origins of different rituals leave no doubt as to the naked patriarchy of the ceremony's origins. Bridesmaids were originally dressed similarly to the bride so as to confuse marauders who would wish to abduct the woman. Groomsmen were warriors whose role was to help the bridegroom fight off the would-be kidnapers. The cedar chest and mother-of-the-bride embroidered handkerchiefs—even the beading and faux-pearling and glitter down the bodices of many dresses—are all vestigial reminders that brides and their trousseaus were essentially chattel to be bartered, bearing a specific value. Even the word *honeymoon* derives from the Old English custom of sending the couple off for a month to drink honeyed ale, as a way to relax sexual inhibitions and, presumably, ease the anxieties of virginal teenage brides



who most likely had had little contact with their mates, and whose attraction to them was generally considered an irrelevance. But in the glossy pages, these fairly unnerving details fade into quaintness.

The centerpiece of *Brideland* is, of course, the dress, and it is this that has elicited my deepest buried fantasies. For a reason that for a long time was mysterious, I felt that I had to, but absolutely had to, create a wedding dress that had an eighteenth-century bodice, three-quarter-length sleeves, and an ankle-length skirt with voluminous panniers. I have since homed in on the trace-memory, and realize that the transcendently important look of my dress on the critical day was predetermined by a drawing of a milkmaid in the A. A. Milne (creator of Pooh) children's book, *Now We Are Six*. [1995]

## 15

### *On Being a "Good Girl": Implications for Latinas in the United States*

ELISA DÁVILA

I am an immigrant Latina. My gender, my ethnicity, and my status as an "émigré," shape and define my life and the work I do. I was born in Colombia, a beautiful but violent country. The early years of my life were marked by the horrors of civil war.<sup>1</sup> I grew up not only witnessing the desolation left by civil war but also experiencing the inner devastation forced upon women by the socially constructed demands of *good-girlism*.<sup>2</sup> As a woman, I have had a major struggle to overcome the senseless impositions of a patriarchal and sexist society, which has established different standards of behavior for men and women. This is particularly relevant for Latina women living in a *machista* society and having to conform to the dictates of *marianismo*.

The origins and ideology of *marianismo* and how it affects women were first discussed by Evelyn

Stevens in 1973. In the essay "Marianismo: The Other Face of Machismo in Latin America," she writes:

Latin American mestizo cultures—from the Rio Grande to the Tierra del Fuego—exhibit a well-defined pattern of beliefs and behavior centered on popular acceptance of a stereotype of the ideal woman. This stereotype, like its *macho* counterpart, is ubiquitous in every social class. There is near universal agreement on what a "real woman" is like and how she should act. Among the characteristics of this ideal are semidivinity, moral superiority, and spiritual strength. This spiritual strength engenders abnegation, that is, an infinite capacity for humility and sacrifice. No self-denial is too great for the Latin American woman, no limit can be divined to her vast store of patience with the men of her world. Although she may be sharp with her daughters—and even cruel to her daughter-in-law—she is and must be complaisant toward her own mother and her mother-in-law for they, too, are reincarnations of the great mother. She is also submissive to the demands of the men: husbands, sons, fathers, brothers.<sup>3</sup>

As a young woman, I realized that I did not like being what was considered a *good girl* in my culture. I was aware of the different treatment given to the males in the family (brothers, cousins, friends). While men were allowed the freedom to go alone into town, to stay up late, to party all night long, and particularly to wait around to be served by the women around them, my sisters and I were held to different standards.

Being a *good girl* meant denying big chunks of myself such as the freedom to choose a career over a husband, to work and live away from home, or the basic right to know my feelings and to experience my own body. In a patriarchal society like Colombia's, a woman is expected to conform to a set of rules that dictate the manner by which she can act, dress, talk, have sex, even think. A woman is supposed to accept domesticity and motherhood as the two guiding forces of her life.

Home. Family. Honor. These are the guiding principles of female-male relations that have remained constant from 1492 to the present. The typical Latin American family is portrayed as patriarchal